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2 November 1980

MEMORANDUM

Some Implications of Renewed US Arms Deliveries to Iran

Summary

The US delivery of spare parts to Iran probably would have little immediate impact on the war except to boost Iranian morale. The Iranian military's shortage of trained manpower and internal supply distribution problems will continue to restrain Iran from launching a successful major counter-attack. []

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Iraq has become increasingly concerned that the US will ship military supplies, Saddam Hussein already has threatened some sort of retaliation. []

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To placate Iraq, the Saudis would almost certainly criticize the US for releasing war material to Iran, but we believe Riyadh would be reluctant to go beyond cosmetic gestures unless Saudi leaders calculated that the US was entering a major new arms relationship aimed at prolonging the war and splitting the Arabs. []

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If a release of the hostages is accompanied by significant US military aid to Iran and a clear resurgence of US influence, the Soviets would likely move to provide large scale military assistance to Iraq. The Soviets, however, probably believe that a dramatic improvement in US-Iranian relations is most unlikely. Moscow, therefore, would use pressures and blandishments to persuade Tehran to balance any deals with Washington with commensurate deals with Moscow. []

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This memorandum was prepared by analysts in the Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Near East South Asia Division, and USSR-EE Division, Office of Political Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to Deputy Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center, []

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Spare Parts and Iran's Capabilities

Iran's greatest resupply needs are jet fuel and spare parts, particularly for electric and hydraulic systems on its US-made fighter aircraft. The decline of air force capability greatly reduces Iran's ability to defend itself and to carry the war to Iraq. It also has a political and psychological impact; the air force has played a major role in creating the impression that Iran has considerable offensive power. Iran's understrength ground forces have been less affected by spare parts shortages than by the impact of poor maintenance and by transportation problems. [REDACTED]

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The delivery of US spare parts to Iran would probably have no appreciable immediate impact on the war although delivery would boost Iranian morale. Iran's internal resupply system is notoriously slow and handicapped by technical problems with the US-supplied computers used to monitor equipment inventory. Even if needy units were to receive requested equipment, they would have to overcome severe problems caused by a shortage of technicians and trained crews. [REDACTED]

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In the longer term--several months--sustained delivery of US-made spare parts would allow Iran's Air Force to increase air sorties to near the level seen at the beginning of the war--150 per day. The increase in Iranian airstrikes would make Iraqi military operations more difficult, adversely affect Iraqi morale, and, from a purely military perspective, prolong the war. [REDACTED]

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Resupply of munitions and spare parts to the ground forces would enable combat units to maintain their resistance at the current level of intensity, but would not increase Iran's capability to escalate the war. Iran would not as a consequence of such deliveries be able to launch a successful major counter-attack, and Iraq would maintain its overall military superiority. [REDACTED]

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Foreign ReactionsIraq

Iraq has become increasingly concerned that the US will ship military supplies to Iran in return for the release of the hostages. Saddam Hussein recently told [REDACTED] that such action would invite Iraqi retaliation against the US and by implication any other Western arms supplier. Saddam argued that US aid would not affect the outcome of the war in Iran's favor, but would only prolong the fighting. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Saddam did not specify what form reprisal would take, but claimed that Iraq would be supported by Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states. The Iraqi leader said a resumption of Western arms shipments to Iran would elicit a Soviet response on behalf of Iraq. Saddam would certainly see the Soviets as a potential counterweight to any reemerging US-Iran links. The prospect of improved Iraqi-Soviet ties would not be viewed favorably by moderate Arab states. [REDACTED]

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Iraq could retaliate with demonstrations at the US Interest Section in Baghdad, a break in diplomatic relations, and a surge of propaganda to the Arab world focusing on US military aid to Iran and Israel. [REDACTED]

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Saddam's threats cannot be dismissed, but they may be intended to minimize in scope and duration any US arms deal with Iran, which Saddam probably expects but is powerless to prevent. Baghdad may hope that strong talk now will ward off a long term relationship which would threaten its present military superiority and lead to more extensive US intervention in the Gulf. [REDACTED]

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Saudi Arabia

To placate Iraq the Saudis would almost certainly criticize the US for releasing war material to Iran while the fighting continues. Riyadh would be reluctant, however, to go beyond cosmetic gestures for fear of damaging its relations with the US and at the same time inviting Iranian retaliation. The Saudis know that if they order the AWACs aircraft to leave, they would be vulnerable to Iranian air strikes. As long, therefore, as the trade for the hostages was a short term deal involving relatively small amounts of military material, the Saudis would acquiesce without striking out at US interests. [REDACTED]

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The Saudi reaction would be much sharper if the US entered into a major new arms supply relationship with Tehran that helped to prolong the war. They would see that as a deliberate US attempt to further divide the Arabs and to weaken their ability to press the US on the Palestinian issue. [REDACTED]

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Jordan

King Hussein fears a release of arms to Iran would be a prelude to a regularized US-Iran arms relationship. A US-Iranian arms link would lead to more intense pressure from Saddam Hussein for more active Jordanian support, probably

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[redacted]

including dispatch of troops to Iraq. This in turn, would exacerbate existing divisions in the Arab world and leave King Hussein vulnerable to Syrian, Libyan and radical Palestinian efforts to stir trouble in Jordan. Jordanian protests to the US would probably be limited to the verbal worrying that occurred on 29 October. [redacted]

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The King told Ambassador Veliotis on 29 October that Iraq is in a poor long-term military position because of Soviet refusal to resupply its armed forces. Hussein warned that US arms shipments to Iran would force Baghdad to seek Soviet arms on Soviet terms, a development which Hussein thinks could leave Baghdad a virtual Soviet satellite. [redacted]

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Hussein would be apprehensive about a spare parts shipment to Iran, even if he were convinced that quantity and duration were limited. He would try to persuade the Iraqis that such a shipment would have little effect on the course of the war and his own reaction would probably be low-key. [redacted]

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Gulf States

The relief of Gulf rulers that the hostage crisis had been resolved would be overshadowed by concern that the US hostage deal would strengthen Iran militarily and prolong the war. Continued fighting means greater pressure on them to help Iraq and increased possibility of the war's spreading. The Gulf states, while wary of an Iraqi victory, are more concerned that an Iraqi defeat will stimulate intensified Shia subversion of Sunni rulers. [redacted]

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Whatever the reality of a US-Iranian agreement, Gulf rulers would probably hold an exaggerated view of its terms and suspect it is the beginning of a long term arms resupply agreement with Iran. Most leaders, particularly Kuwaitis, would feel compelled to support an Iraqi protest of the lifting of the US arms embargo against Iran. [redacted]

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Other Arab Reactions

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A US-Iranian agreement that provides for limited US arms deliveries to Iran will be seen by most Arab governments as anti-Arab and as prolonging the war, which is contrary to their individual national interests. We believe, however, that their opposition would be expressed in verbal and symbolic ways. [redacted]

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USSR

The Soviets would consider release of the hostages a serious setback to their efforts to advance their own influence in Iran and to counter the return of a US presence there. The Iraq-Iran war has already led to a larger US military presence in the Indian Ocean region as well as to improved US ties with moderate states on the Arabian Peninsula; a hostage release would remove the major obstacle to a resumption of military and economic relations between Western Europe and Iran and open the door to a resumption of similar dealings between Tehran and the US. [REDACTED] 25X1

The Soviets' initial response to a hostage release would be to escalate their own efforts to insinuate themselves in Iran. Moscow would probably recognize that an end to the hostage crisis would not guarantee a return of the former US position in Iran and that significant Iranian hostility toward the US would remain. The Soviets would use both pressure and blandishments to convince Tehran that any economic and military dealings with the US should be matched by commensurate deals with the USSR. [REDACTED] 25X1

The Soviets would go to great lengths to assure Iran's continued antipathy toward the US. Once the hostage release was made, the Soviets would shift their propaganda from the hostage issue to US exploitation of the Iraq-Iran war and the enhanced US military presence in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. [REDACTED] 25X1

The degree that Moscow would tilt to Iraq in the wake of a hostage release would be determined in part by the future level of US-Iranian relations. If the release of the hostages were accompanied by significant US military aid to Iran and a clear resurgence of US influence, it would be more likely that the Soviets would move publicly and strongly to furnish large-scale military support to Iraq in an effort to preserve the greatest possible position with at least one of the antagonists. In the more likely eventuality that the end of the hostage crisis was not accompanied by a decisive improvement in US influence in Tehran, the Soviets would feel less compelled to provide large-scale military support to Baghdad. The Soviets, instead, would make some tactical moves to try to reverse the recent deterioration in Soviet-Iraqi relations such as moving to provide Iraq with limited arms supplies. [REDACTED] 25X1

If a renewed US-Iranian relationship were accomplished by a decisive political shift to the right in Tehran, then Soviet pressure tactics might ultimately include greater support for [REDACTED]

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Iranian ethnic and tribal groups. Iranian preoccupation with its minorities would weaken the Tehran government and, from the Soviet point of view, open opportunities for both Iranian leftists and Soviet influence. Iran's fragmentation into dependent ethnic areas, moreover, would enable the USSR to work for pro-Soviet regimes on its southern border. [REDACTED]

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There is no guarantee, however, that such ethnic groups as the Kurds and the Azerbaijanis would be any more pro-Soviet or any less vulnerable to US exploitation. Furthermore, Moscow would recognize that open support for such groups would be likely to intensify the very US-Iranian connection it most wants to avoid. [REDACTED]

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